

Rita and I have recently rediscovered one of the oldest, heirloom garden plants. Throughout history, it has been called a flower, an herb, a vegetable and even a fruit. Said to have originated in Peru and to have been cultivated by the ancient Incas, it was used as a medicinal herb as well as an edible vegetable. Conquistadors carried the plant to Spain in the early 16th Century. Monet grew it at Giverny in France. Thomas



Jefferson planted it in his vegetable garden at Monticello. It is reported that Jefferson enjoyed its delightful taste so much that he entered it into his journal as a fruit. I've known about it for years, but it wasn't until two years ago we began growing it.

With names like Cherries Jubilee, Amazon Jewel, Moonlight, Copper Sunset, Spitfire, Alaska Mix, Empress of India, Vanilla Berry and Whirly bird, I'm referring to

Tropaeolum majus, commonly called nasturtium.

Nasturtiums are inexpensive and can easily be grown from seed. They are adaptable and remarkably versatile. Brightly colored blossoms in shades of reds, yellows, oranges, golds, and whites bloom continuously while peeking through the decorative foliage.



The versatility of nasturtiums is based upon the manner in which they grow. There are three types.



Dwarf varieties are ideal for smaller areas such as in planter boxes or to edge flower beds and walkways. Growing ten to fifteen inches tall, dwarf varieties are compact and come in a wide variety of colors including apricot, mahogany and cherry. Flowers bloom in single, semi-double and double forms. Cherries Jubilee, Alaska Mix, Copper Sunset, Empress of India, Vanilla Berry and Whirlybird are all dwarf varieties.

Semi-trailing types are well suited for hanging baskets, topiaries, trailing over rocks or cascading down walls. Vines grow up to 4 feet in length. Amazon Jewel is an excellent example of semi-trailing nasturtiums.

Trailing types are the perfect choice for climbing an arbor or trellis. They are fast growers and quick to bloom. Moonlight can grow up to ten feet in a single season which makes it a choice variety for crawling a fence or even as a groundcover. To grow these vines, they need to be tied to support them as they climb.



The leaves of all nasturtiums have a beauty of their own. Most varieties have leaves that are deep green in color, but some have blue-green foliage and others are variegated. Nasturtium leaves resemble the leaves of water lily plants. They are round and flat with their stem attached at the center, the veins radiate in an outward direction.

One can successfully grow nasturtiums by planting seeds directly into the soil after the threat of frost is past. They do best in full sun to part shade. Seeds should be planted one inch deep in well-drained soil. Germination takes approximately ten days. When seedlings are large enough to handle, thin plants according to the seed packet instructions.

For the past two years we have been growing Cherries Jubilee in our window boxes. This variety reaches a length of ten to twelve inches and softly drapes over the window box. It is covered with multitudes of rosy-red flowers. Rarely, if ever, do we deadhead.

This year we also grew Amazon Jewel nasturtiums at home and in the planter at our church. Both species add exquisite color and texture to the planter; however, Amazon Jewel may be a bit large and aggressive. We've decided they'd look better at the back of a border rather than near the front.



By the way, did I mention nasturtiums are edible? Although their leaves and flowers can be eaten, Rita and I have yet to try them. From what I've read, they have a spicy-sweet, peppery taste.

I'm convinced the benefits that nasturtiums bring to any garden are worth the venture. Remember, they've been around for a long, long, time. Perhaps, next season you'll decide to try them.